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CLAUSEWITZ, NUCLEAR WAR AND DETERRENCE

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War, for Clausewitz, is an act of policy, a political instrument towards a specific end. It exists not in and of itself but in order to support a political objective. For his theories to be put into practice, the political decision had to be made to wage war. The advent of nuclear weapons and their role in the evolving east-west struggle following the second world war created a situation, however, unforeseen by Clausewitz, where the most basic political objective has been the prevention of war using these weapons, rather than to consider their actual use towards a specific military end. How would Clausewitz have reacted to such a situation, where the overriding political objective is to avoid the use of his profession as an active instrument of policy implementation?

He probably would have started his study of nuclear war as he did his study of conventional war, studying it; examining it; attempting to fit it into his established framework and rewriting his basic theses before reaching a conclusion on it. Until he had done so, confident that he had thoroughly understood nuclear war's nature and ramifications, I doubt he would have ventured a critique of anyone else's analysis of the subject, including Bernard Brodie's. However, by examining some of Clausewitz's most basic elements, and by attempting to determine how he might have applied or adapted these elements of the phenomenon of nuclear war, we may find an indication of how he would have reacted to it and whether he would have supported Brodie's conclusion that its only use is as a deterrent.

Nuclear War as an Isolated, Single, Final Act

War, wrote Clausewitz, is never an isolated act. It can not be spread instantaneously. It does not consist of one decisive act. Its result is never final. Although a full analysis of these maxims in the nuclear age could argue there is some middle ground, the emergence of nuclear warfare in effect reverses all these statements. A strategic nuclear exchange can spread instantaneously; it can consist of a single short blow; and its outcome can be regarded as final. Nuclear warfare, therefore, is not the kind of warfare Clausewitz addresses. Its very nature forces him to change his analysis of the subject. It is no longer a surgical tool to meet specific military objectives in a greater game. When possessed by two belligerents neither is it a tool to win the game at one throw. Rather, it ends the game by destroying both players. Nuclear warfare is no longer a

means to an end, it is the end in itself. By assuring mutual destruction, the actual use of nuclear weapons is alien to the nature of his vision of war. It is, therefore, something to be avoided. Once it exists, however, how can its use be avoided? One nation can control its own nuclear forces and make the political decision not to use them offensively. That nation can not make the same decision for its opponent. It can, however, Clausewitz would argue, compel him not to use them. In the twentieth century, on the strategic level, Clausewitz, from the west's standpoint, would have defined the cold war as the threat of nuclear force to compel the Soviet Union to do our will by deterring it from using these weapons. In this context, at least, he and Brodie would have been in agreement.

Nuclear War begins with the Complex

The emergence of nuclear warfare reverses many of Clausewitz's most basic maxims. Instead of proceeding from the simple to the complex, the prospect of nuclear war requires Clausewitz to proceed from the complex to the simple. Nuclear war is no longer an endless series of duels determining the whole. It is instead a single duel, with defeat and death the inevitable result for both opponents. There are no seconds left to carry on the struggle. The political objective, then - to assure national survival - is to reach a convention with an opponent to prevent the duel in the first place. The west's objective in Europe in the period following the second world war remained to force the enemy to do its will, but our will was that the east not attack - that nuclear war be avoided. To this extent Clausewitz would have accepted the deterrent role of nuclear weapons within his existing definitions. He grants that war may consist of inactivity: that an inactive and strong defense (deterrent) is a viable option which can be held until a political objective is reached. He would have been proven correct by witnessing the collapse of Eastern Europe in 1989. The political objective of the west (i.e. to use the threat of nuclear weapons to prevent a war of Soviet expansion and nuclear confrontation) was met by the successful use of the nuclear threat as both a Brodian deterrent and a Clausewitzian defense.

The Political Objective of Nuclear War

For Clausewitz, conventional war escalates naturally towards absolute war, until other factors come into play to limit this extreme. In the case

of nuclear war, this Clausewitzian maxim is also reversed. Strategic nuclear war starts at the level of absolute war and can't escalate beyond that point. Once it has begun there are no other factors to come into play to limit its brutality. Maximum violence occurs from the outset. Nuclear war, Clausewitz might have argued, "would of its own independent will usurp the place of policy the moment policy brought it into being." If the political objective is to determine the level to which war escalates, in the case of nuclear war the only such objective which can effectively control the level of violence of a nuclear exchange is the objective of avoiding the exchange in the first place. The only military objective that can be adopted to serve this political objective, Clausewitz might have argued, is the threat of the nuclear destruction of the enemy in any exchange. From this standpoint it also seems likely he would have accepted the validity of the use of strategic nuclear forces purely as a deterrent.

The Consequences for Theory

For Clausewitz, war consists of a paradoxical trinity: primordial violence, subordination to policy and "the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam." Unfortunately, in strategic nuclear warfare - the battle after the buttons have been pushed and the weapons launched - there is no room left for the creative spirit to roam. Chance and probability cease to influence the outcome of the exchange. Clausewitz's paradoxical trinity is reduced to the interaction of violence and its subordination to policy. The policy becomes the avoidance of the violence, and the objective that the use of nuclear warfare remains subordinate to that policy and thus "subject to reason alone". Nuclear deterrence is the use of the mutual threat of nuclear violence to assure the prevalence of reason on the part of both belligerents.

Nuclear Warfare, Deterrence and Clausewitzian Defense

"What is the object of defense," asks Clausewitz. Preservation of ground. What is the object of nuclear deterrence in the twentieth century, he might ask. His answer would also be preservation. Preservation of ground is the object of cold war containment. Preservation of peace is a second objective, and the preservation of civilization a third. In the nuclear age, a defense of deterrence is intrinsically preferable to any offense. Collective

security, according to Clausewitz, maintains the integrity of individual states. Although a strategic nuclear exchange eliminates many defensive factors of interest to Clausewitz (terrain, theaters of operation, the importance of fortresses, even combat itself) the inherent value of a strong defense remains. Deterrence, however, is different than Clausewitzian defense. Clausewitz, when addressing conventional war, prefers the defense "only as long as weakness compels", to be abandoned when an attack and probable victory become possible. Equal nuclear deterrence, however, eliminates the possibility of either side becoming strong enough to successfully attack. Escalating strength on one side leads to escalating deterrence on the other. Permanent preservation of the existing peace becomes the objective rather than the hope of eventual military conquest. If he had studied the history of cold war nuclear deterrence Clausewitz would have concluded in 1989 that the principle of absolute deterrent defense is no longer an "absurd" concept. It is instead now a valid and proven use of military capability to reach a political objective without actually employing combat.

Conclusion: The Validity of Clausewitz in the Nuclear Age

If changing political objectives and the emergence of nuclear warfare have replaced Clausewitz's absolute war with long-term strategic deterrence, as discussed above, what has the effect been on wars of limited aims? Clausewitz, in studying the period 1945 - 1990, would have quickly concluded that nuclear weapons involved in strategic deterrence have not eliminated wars of more limited nature. Combat, although absent in a nuclear exchange or its deterrence, still exists. Political tensions and objectives of many kinds still "discharge energy in discontinuous minor shocks". The politics of the cold war and the threat of mutual nuclear devastation have deterred absolute war but have not prevented limited wars. As Clausewitz predicted, "the transformation of the art of war has resulted from the transformation of politics". Limited political objectives can still dictate limited warfare within the framework of strategic nuclear deterrence which prevents these conflicts from escalating into an absolute nuclear war. Thus while the nuclear age would have required Clausewitz to adapt his concept of absolute war to the realities of strategic nuclear deterrence, it would not have led him to make major changes in his conclusions regarding wars of limited aims. He would have studied with enthusiasm battles in Korea, Vietnam and throughout the

third world, and he would have concluded that most of his theories of war remain relevant at this level. Indeed, having witnessed the demise of absolute war in the nuclear age he would have seen an increasing importance for the application of limited warfare to east-west geopolitical objectives, and would have revised and refined his thoughts on war to reflect this development. He would have agreed with Brodie on the strategic level that the military's mission has become to avoid nuclear war, but he certainly would have gone beyond this premise by developing an expanded application of his theories to wars of limited aims. Even if held to a peaceful standoff at the level of nuclear deterrence by the force of reason, Clausewitz would argue, the blind natural forces of primordial violence, hatred and enmity have not been eliminated and warrant continued attention and study.

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